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ABSTRACT

Two approaches to communication research, diffusion theory (individual-level analysis) and empathy approach (action implications through society) raise ethical concerns. The popularity of the approaches is related to power: those, such as government agencies, who provide funding often reflect self-interest in project selection. Some ethical implications are the necessity of paying attention to the effects actions may have upon subjects now and in the future; the need to exercise caution in choosing topics and sponsors; the refusal of researchers to allow themselves automatically to be assumed supporters of the status quo; and the enormous imbalances between United States communications researchers and Third World recipients of their advice calls for special caution on the part of the researcher who can return to the comfort of home regardless of inadvertently causing increased poverty, humiliation, or even death through advice given. (A bibliography of suggested readings is included with the paper.) (1J)

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ETHICAL ISSUES IN INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION:
THE CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

The 1950s . . .

They were years of apathy amidst prosperity in the United States, years of bobby sox and saddle shoes, of doing the lindy at the hop, of moving to the suburbs. They gave us Ike and the Big Bopper, and now they are giving us Grease and the Fonz.

Those years also saw the Cold War deepening and a hot war ending. They saw the coining of a phrase that was to be repeated often, "the military-industrial complex". Abroad as well as at home, military and business increasingly worked together to further joint interests.

And the 1950s saw the beginnings in mass communication research of two approaches to the study of communication and development that would come to dominate in the following decade and a half. The two -- diffusion research (Rogers, 1962, 1969) and Lerner's "empathy" ideas (1958) -- were to spawn hundreds of empirical studies over the years. Why were these two approaches so popular? What can their brief histories teach us about ethics in communication?

TWO APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Some aspects of the diffusion approach are nicely illustrated by a story told by Roling, Ascroft, and Chege (1976, p. 63):

At a farmers' training center in a rural district somewhere in Africa, grassroots fieldworkers are receiving systematic training about diffusion for the first time. We witness the occasion at a moment when the trainer, himself a diploma-level extension worker, explains diffusion theory with the help of an AID-produced manual on extension. At issue is the presentation of the bell-shaped diffusion curve: 2.5% are innovators, 12.5% are early adopters, 34% early majority, 34% late majority. . . . At this point, a question is raised: "Sir, why are the early and late

majority both 34%?" The teaching manual has dug a deep hole for the trainer. He hesitates. Finally he says: "I think they are neighbors."

First, diffusion research was widely diffused itself. The way it was diffused was not always the most suitable to conditions it encountered in the field, but its ideas did find wide adoption.

Second, the diffusion approach found considerable support from governmental funding agencies. The U.S. Agency for International Development not only funded a good part of the research, it also encouraged its dissemination around the globe.

Third, the approach rested fundamentally and almost exclusively on an individual-level analysis. Social structure played little or no part in particular research projects or applications, though given somewhat more attention in theoretical discussions.

Along with the focus on the individual came the feeling, in attempted applications, that if particular individuals did not adopt an "innovation", they were somehow blameworthy. Those responsible for increasing crop yields through new seeds, new fertilizers, or new cultural practices could hardly feel otherwise when their basic frame of reference in the situation pointed them only to the individual.

Finally, the last aspect of the diffusion approach to be mentioned in this very brief characterization, a particular action implication arose from the emphasis on the individual. If the theoretical framework focused almost exclusively on the individual, it was the individual who somehow had to change for development to occur. It was the individual to whom programs had to be directed, and not just any individual. Rather, for programs to demonstrate success, the types of individuals most likely to change in the desired manner became the logical targets of action-oriented programs. The diffusion approach supplied a rationale for ignoring the needs of some and a bureaucratic impetus for dealing first with others, those whose actions would be most likely to make the program appear successful.

In contrast to the seeming mathematical precision of the diffusion approach, the empathy approach was vague in the extreme. Lerner postulated a temporal sequence of events both in individuals and in societies. The attention given to the societal level of analysis has been called one of the most attractive aspects of the empathy approach. If diffusion theory could deal with individuals, the empathy approach was ready with an "explanation" of events on a grander scale.

The empathy approach also proved popular with funding agencies. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology became one of the leading centers of research in communication and development, with Lerner joined by colleagues such as Lucian Pye, Frederick W. Prey, and Ithiel de Sola Pool. They enjoyed government funding and a wide audience among development planners in the Third World.

As other scholars came to do empirical research using the empathy approach as a theoretical foundation, however, considerable difficulties were encountered. The presentation of the theory, by Lerner and others, remained heartily resistant to unequivocal formulation.

The central concept of "empathy" was found to encompass several others from the literature of psychology, such as projection, introjection, identification, knowledge, or opinion (Gompertz, 1960), in addition to empathy as more commonly formulated. The additional meaning resulted in difficulties operationalization.

The sequences of variables postulated by Lerner were read in one way by one scholar and in another way by the next. There seemed little agreement on which variables Lerner had meant to come first in the sequences, which next, and so forth.

An important theoretical term was "participation." As applied it carried unmistakable signs of ethnocentrism. Measurement typically included some index of voting in an election with the hallmarks of those in the United States.

As the diffusion approach pointed to the individual, the empathy approach pointed to the society for action implications. The central recommendation under the empathy approach seemed to be that mass communication be increased at a rapid pace. The increase in the social institution of mass communication media outlets was expected to have an effect on the individuals exposed to their output. Through exposure to the "modern" world in the contents of the mass media, the poverty-stricken and illiterate masses of the developing countries would somehow develop "empathy", leading to their material and social betterment. Structural changes in a society would follow naturally from the cumulative results of individual changes, without social upheaval. The "participant society", modelled on the United States, would follow naturally.

With these very crude characterizations of a few aspects of the two approaches behind us, let us return to one of our original questions. Why were the two approaches so popular? What might account for their widespread presentation in the halls of academia and government?

POPULARITY AND POWER

A number of the reasons for the popularity of these two approaches to communication and development can be traced, it seems to me, to power. I hasten to add a qualification.

It has been held that the individuals involved not only were motivated by high moral considerations, but that some undertook field research at considerable danger to themselves. It is not the purpose here to advance charges of moral failings.

What is at issue is not the persons involved, but the popularity of their products. Despite ethical concern of a praiseworthy nature, something went wrong. What that was will be discussed in connection with some factors related to power.

The climate of ideas of the times might be held to have led, with seeming inevitability, to the ascendancy of the diffusion and empathy approaches. It seems useful, however, to provide a somewhat more concrete discussion of the workings of the ideas. Through what means were the dominant currents in the world of ideas of the time realized in the particular forms taken by the diffusion and empathy approaches? This is where the idea of power becomes a useful tool.

Power has been defined as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests." (Weber, [1922] 1957, p. 152) A variety of bases may be identified, such as money, persuasion, the granting, withholding, or distortion of information, or, at the extreme, brute force.

The first factor related to power that might be considered here is the nature of the sponsors of much of the research conducted under the two dominant traditions in communication and development. Sponsors included not only AID, but other government agencies. For example, it is my understanding that some work was funded by the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the U.S. Department of Defense.

I am not suggesting a conspiracy theory of research funding. But I would suggest that most research sponsors exercise a good deal of power in the matter of choosing which proposed projects they will fund. It would seem reasonable to assert that most would not fund studies they thought would jeopardize their own interests. I would further suggest that as sponsors, government agencies would encourage lines of research that seemed most likely to be

consonant with their own perceived interests.

It would seem somewhat unusual if, in those years of intensifying cold war, the agencies involved did not perceive research they funded at least partly in terms of East-West struggle. Why would the two approaches seem well-suited to such an environment?

The diffusion approach is blind when it comes to government. Since social structure played virtually no role in the approach, it could be, and was, largely ignored in applications. Vast social inequities in target populations could be sidestepped.

The closed eyes of the diffusion approach to social structure also led, however, to one of its major shortcomings in an ethical sense. The problem became apparent only after some years of application of diffusion principles. It stemmed from the built-in bureaucratic incentive to concentrate on those most likely to adopt. The first to adopt are often those already at the top of the social hierarchy. By concentrating government change efforts on those already privileged, government agents widened existing social gaps. In some cases, the wealthiest and most powerful and privileged villagers acquired more land and modern capital equipment; the poorest were driven off their land.

The undesirable results of blindness to social structure certainly cannot have been welcomed by all who supported diffusion research. However, the blindness itself may well have been welcomed by some in the funding agencies, or in their parent bodies, who saw a need to work with the most inequalitarian and repressive governments in the developing world in order to carry on the cold war battles.

The empathy approach embodied a different sort of blindness to social structure. In proclaiming a natural process of increasing "participation" in economy and polity, it seemed to make unnecessary any immediate steps toward structural change. It provided one rationale for the "trickle-down theory" of economic development, now thoroughly discredited.

The empathy approach and the diffusion approach, then, shared an amenability to use within the ideological framework of the cold war. The concerns of the sponsors were not threatened, at least so far as foresight allowed, by the research approaches they funded. In fact, the approaches allowed a certain latitude of action with respect to governments that might have been more difficult to deal with under other theoretical frameworks of communication and development.

A second factor possibly related to power is research funding itself. While no accounts of dollar amounts devoted to various approaches to communication and development have come to my attention, it seems likely that the diffusion and empathy approaches gathered in a large share of what was spent. Money was available not only for field work, rare enough in itself in that time as well as today, but also for writing, travel, conferences, and other forms of dissemination of the diffusion and empathy approaches. The funding levels conferred a status on the ideas not attained by other theoretical frameworks.

If power is the ability to make men do what they would not otherwise, the high levels of funding seem to have conferred power on the diffusion and empathy ideas. How many term papers, theses, dissertations, and publications arose out of those ideas? How many would have been done without the considerable funding enjoyed by the proponents of the ideas? How much advice was given around the world under those two rubrics? Again, this is not to suggest base motives of any sort. Rather, it does suggest that the world of ideas is not immune to financial incentives.

A third power factor involves a consonance of interests between government funding agencies and U.S. private business, industrial, and financial sectors. Private-sector interests form one of many considerations in the formulation of U.S. foreign and defense policy.

It would seem reasonable to expect that the "military-industrial complex" of which President Eisenhower warned us would have its own interests. Overseas, those interests would include stable regimes eager to engage in business on terms perceived as advantageous by American parties.

If the diffusion and empathy approaches to communication and development did hold little threat of upsetting the regimes of established trading nations, or even promised increased stability, little objection would be expected to them on the part of U.S. business interests. On the other hand, conceptions of the role of communication in development which might threaten stability could well find active opposition from business organizations. The mixing, even the confusion, of private and governmental interests finds perhaps its most striking recent example in the case of ITT involvement in Chile.

These are a few of the ways that power may be related to academic popularity of ideas. The discussion is not exhaustive; the framework remains sketchy.

Many other perspectives besides that of power could be brought to bear in understanding the ascendancy of the diffusion and empathy approaches. For example, a developing

common ideology between government and academia might well be postulated for the 1950s. Elements of the ideology might include a positivist outlook, related faith in numerical reports as a basis for action, declining openness to non-quantified aspects of experience, and elitism. Vietnam might represent a high point of such an ideology.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

What ethical lessons can we draw from the discussion above? A few will be suggested; undoubtedly, many more could be developed.

A good first lesson would seem to be the value of humility. Social theory and social action are different realms. They relate in many ways, but the theorist must remain humble in the face of the "buzzing confusion" of reality. The humility should be practiced not only with respect to theory itself, but even more with regard to advice about its application.

Second, it's time to discard the remarkable unselfconsciousness of the field of international communication. We need to pay more attention to what we are doing, to the reasons for our actions, to the effects they may have now and in the future, and to their ethical implications.

We need to move beyond the sort of vague generalities presented in this paper to precisely defined concepts and tightly-constructed, well-supported propositions. A sociology of knowledge of international communication is needed. For constructing such a body of work, some research suggestions may be helpful. Detailed case studies would be useful, along with other forms of empirical research. The perceptions of those on the receiving end of theories of communication and development, the villages and the slum-dwellers, should be investigated. Additional study is needed on the relation of theory to policy and action. Ethical considerations deserve direct and sophisticated analysis.

Third, a degree of caution seems called for in choosing not only topics for research, the place where even the positivist approach to social science admits the relevancy of values, but also in choosing sponsors for research. It seems as if it would be worth some speculation and checking on the part of applicants as to the motivations and interests of possible funding sources. It could be that

some research is better left undone than completed under funding by particular sources. Perhaps an interest in funding expressed by given sources should throw up an ethical caution light to potential applicants.

Fourth, in communication and development, researchers should not let themselves automatically be defined as supporters of the status quo. A posture such as that is worth deep consideration before it is assumed. One topic to look at is the social structural implications, short-term and long-term, of a theoretical position. Another is the implications of the same kind in a particular research project.

Fifth, the examples given above do indicate, I feel, the need for better theory and research. The scholar has an ethical obligation to pursue research of the highest quality. Not only in its technical aspects, but also in its concern with social as well as psychological dimensions, research quality in communication and development must be a concern. Where policy consultation is involved, it seems reasonable, on the basis of information not presented here, to call for long-term field experiments as a promising methodology. Their substantial cost and the unique ethical issues they raise do, however, limit their applicability.

Sixth, the problems of the diffusion and empathy approaches illustrate the ethical imbalance between U.S. communication scholars and Third World recipients of advice based on their work. An Indian student of mine put it, "Does the mouse have an obligation to look out for the elephant?" The slightest misstep on the part of the advice-givers can result in deeper poverty, humiliation, even death for the final objects of the advice, the poor of the developing countries. The consultant, in the meantime, can return home to a comfortable life with reputation enhanced by prestigious assignments abroad.

Finally, it appears to me that ethical considerations raise extremely difficult and very personal choices. Nobody can foresee all the implications of his actions. Decisions made in the best conscience can and do have unexpected results. I hope this discussion has helped to clarify some of the ethical issues of our field, and I hope it will inspire efforts at further clarification which will provide a more solid basis for empirical illumination of the ethical consequences of actions in international communication.

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